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ABSTRACT

This study explored adult students' conceptions of good college teaching, with a particular aim to identify characteristics distinguishing their conceptions from those of traditional age undergraduate students. Responses to an open-ended questionnaire were received from 181 respondents whose ages ranged from 25 to 57. Results revealed a relative consistency with results obtained in previous studies of traditional age students' perceptions of effective teachers. Across age groups and for both sexes, the most frequently described characteristics of effective teaching focused on teaching style, including clarity of presentations, organization of presentations, the ability to create student involvement, and interesting lectures. In the category of teacher-student relationships, the most positive statements were made about teachers who provided assistance beyond class, showed concern for students, and created a warm learning climate. Adult students indicated high regard for clarity of presentation, well organized lectures and classroom management. (JD)

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Critical Teaching Behaviors as Perceived by Adult Undergraduates

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CRITICAL TEACHING BEHAVIORS AS PERCEIVED BY ADULT UNDERGRADUATES

Statement of the problem

A considerable body of literature is devoted to the topic of student evaluation of faculty at the college level. Feldman (1976) reported one of the more comprehensive reviews of research investigating student perceptions of superior teaching. He noted that across studies using several types of measures two dimensions were most consistently associated with superior college teaching: (a) stimulation of interest, and (b) clarity (understandableness). He also reported that dimensions related to the task of facilitation are among those most frequently mentioned by students spontaneously. These dimensions include friendliness, helpfulness, and openness to other's opinions. He suggested that while these social-emotional matters may be a central part of the spontaneous response repertoire they become less important as more specific and structured response situations increase the saliency of other characteristics.

Given the steady growth of the adult student population within higher education, it seems important that we study this group's perceptions of college teaching for two purposes: (a) to determine in what ways adult students' perceptions of effective teaching agree with or disagree with those previously identified for younger students, and (b) to determine the extent to which the teaching characteristics judged as most critical by adult students are consistent with predictions based on assumptions about adults as learners.

Two studies were identified which using an open-ended response style to investigate perceptions of adult college students with regard to effective college teaching. Alciatore and Alciatore (1979) queried 1,593 college seniors about the quality of the college teaching they received as undergraduates. With regard to age

distinctions, Alciatore and Alciatore noted only that younger students (under 24) agreed with older ones concerning the characteristics of the best and worst teachers, although younger students were more critical of their teachers as a whole. The qualities of the "best" teacher cited by students in this investigation included: (a) interest in students, (b) good personality, (c) interest in subject matter, (d) ability to make the subject interesting, and (e) objectivity in presenting subject matter and in dealing with students.

Keller and Switzner (1983) asked 35 undergraduate students to write down the name of "the best teacher I ever had," then to describe that teacher as completely as possible. The investigators divided the students' responses into four construct categories: (a) psychological (character, personality, or otherwise dispositional), (b) role (habitual activities or role-relevant beliefs), (c) interaction (communication behaviors such as voice and gesture), and (d) other. A higher proportion of the responses of adult students (25 or older) related to psychological constructs (50.7% vs. 35.6% for younger) and interaction constructs (8.6% vs. 5.6%), while a higher proportion of the responses of younger students related to role behaviors (57.4% vs. 34.8% for older). While these results suggest direction for future study, the small number of adult students included in the research (13) limits the ability to make generalizations from the study.

The current investigation was undertaken to further explore adult students' conceptions of good college teaching, with a particular aim to identify characteristics distinguishing their conceptions from those of traditional age undergraduate students.

Methodology

A data collection technique was desired for this investigation which permitted the systematic analysis of open-ended responses suggesting meanings adult students

themselves attribute to teaching effectiveness or ineffectiveness. For this reason the Critical Incident Technique, developed by Flanagan (1954), was selected. Flanagan describes the technique as "essentially a procedure for gathering certain important facts concerning behavior in defined situations "(p. 335). The technique prompts respondents to identify an incident that for some reason was of particular significance for them. Flanagan has indicated that the technique does not consist of a rigid set of rules governing such data collection, but rather a "flexible set of principles which must be modified and adapted to meet the specific situation at hand "(p. 335).

Menges and Kulieke (1984) used the critical incident technique to identify variables associated with satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the college classroom for 54 college students. Of those variables which related to teacher behavior, most frequently mentioned were requirements concerning the teacher's affective behavior, including interest in students, consideration or respect, criticism, and communication patterns. Teacher feedback, interest in subject matter, and allowing students to express themselves were among the most frequently mentioned critical requirements related to teacher tasks.

In the current investigation a questionnaire was mailed to a randomly selected sample of one third of the population of students over 25 (526 students) enrolled in undergraduate classes at the main campus of a multi-campus northeastern university . Six items elicited recall of situations seen as representative of the best and poorest instruction they personally had experienced in college. The questionnaire also requested basic demographic data (sex, age) as well as some information specific to the situation of the adult student (years away from school, employment, number of children).

A consolidated list of common responses was obtained through content analysis of the answers given to each one of the six open-ended questions. Statements referring to critical requirements of effective teaching were coded for 77 separate themes (39 positive, 38 negative). The mean percent of inter-rater agreement on codes for a randomly selected set of 40 questionnaires was 91.5% for positive comments and 85% for negative comments. Responses were classified based on comments referring to (a) the classroom situation, (b) teaching behavior or characteristics, and (c) personal reactions to the recalled incidents. Comments about the learning situation were classified under emerging categories of (a) class size, (b) format of class, (c) age of students, and (d) type of instructor. Critical requirements related to teaching behaviors were classified under four categories: (a) teaching style,(b) teacher-student relationship, (c) personal characteristics and (d) attitudes towards adult students. Statements related to students' reactions to particular behavior were also grouped in four categories: (a) feelings about self, (b) feelings towards instructor, (c) feelings towards the subject and school, and (d) actions taken. Both teacher behavior and student reaction data were also tabulated with categorization by age and gender of respondent. Where comparison of frequency data revealed possible group differences, selected chi-square tests were performed to explore for significant differences in response pattern by group.

Results

Sample

Of the 181 respondents 52% were males and 48% females (7 questionnaires were returned unanswered). Their ages ranged from 25 to 57. Fourteen percent of them had been away from school two years or less, 64% had been away between 3 and 10 years, and 22% had been away 11 or more years. As a group the male respondents

were younger, with sixty-two percent of them between 25 and 29 years of age, 35% between 30 and 34, and 13% age 35 or over. Thirty eight percent of the female respondents were between 25 and 29 years of age, 31% were between 30 and 34, and 31%were 35 or over.

Aggregate results

A total of 619 answers were given to the two questions asking students to "describe briefly, accurately and objectively" some specific act by a particular instructor that "helps him or her stand out in your mind as a superior teacher of adults" or a "particularly ineffective teacher of adults." Positive comments accounted for 57.18% of the responses and negative comments accounted for 42.81%. Of a total of 354 comments about positive teaching incidents, 175 (49.43%) were made by males and 179 (50.56%) by females. As for the 265 comments describing negative incidents, 128 (48.3%) were from male respondents and 137 (51.69%) from females. Thus, males and females responded at fairly equivalent levels to open ended items whether they solicited negative or positive responses.

Three hundred nine responses were given to the two questions asking the students to "state briefly your reaction to the [instructors'] behavior," 52.10% of which described reactions to positive incidents and 47.89% negative ones. Males provided 54.66% of the 161 statements about reactions to positive incidents and 49.32% of the 148 answers describing negative reactions

Situations Surrounding Critical Incidents

Although some students actually described critical incidents which occurred outside the classroom (for instance, in the professor's office) most described salient features of a classroom learning environment. Wide variability was found in the features of the situations on which students focused, resulting in relatively small frequency counts for most of the identified variables. Both positive and negative

incidents were described for classes varying greatly in size, age range of students, format (lecture, lab, studio, discussion) and status of instructor (Teaching Assistant or professor), demonstrating that effective and ineffective teaching can occur in a variety of contexts.

Most frequently mentioned was class format. Lecture classes were mentioned most often in both positive (49) and negative (46) incidents. Labs were next most frequently mentioned (12 positive and 9 negative incidents). Although both these class formats were mentioned in similar proportions for negative and positive incidents, group discussion classes and continuing education classes were approximately twice as likely to be mentioned in a positive context.

Class size was the dimension mentioned next most frequently. Classes of less than 30 students were less likely than larger classes to be reported in describing negative incidents, but medium-size classes (over 30) and large classes (80 - 500) were also mentioned in many of the positive classroom incidents. Large classes (49) and small classes (49) were both more likely to be mentioned for either positive or negative incidents than medium-size classes (24).

Students mentioned the age of their classmates for 25 reported incidents (16 positive, 9 negative). Although classes comprised mainly of younger students or of mixed age groups were mentioned in similar proportions for positive and negative incidents, classes comprised entirely of adults were mentioned only in positive incidents. With only six students mentioning this characteristic of the learning environment, however, it is difficult to draw conclusions about adult student's responses to age of classmates. It is noteworthy that women made 64% of the comments about age of classmates although they comprised only 48% of the sample.

Finally, status of instructor was rarely mentioned, and never with reference to professorial rank. Nineteen students mentioned specifically that the instructor

referred to was a teaching assistant (T. A.). Such statements were made with equivalent frequency regarding positive and negative incidents.

Critical requirements of effective teaching.

Table 1 summarizes the distribution of positive and negative comments across four categories of comments. Comments on teaching style accounted for the largest proportion of the responses describing the teacher's role in critical incidents (category A); 55.87% of the 281 responses in this category related to positive experiences. The most frequent comments coded in this category referred to the clarity of presentations (the instructor "made difficult material clear," or "gave clear, organized presentations"), the ability of the teacher to elicit student involvement ("encouraged students' participation," or "encouraged participation without making students feel bad"), interesting lectures, and the planning and organization of lectures. Negative experiences (124 comments) focused on inconsistency (evaluation of material which had never been covered in class being the most frequent complaint), disorganized and boring lectures and confusing explanations.

Insert Table 1 about here

Concerning the teacher-student relationship (category B) 64.70% out of 184 comments referred to positive incidents. The most frequently occurring positive responses pointed to the value of individual assistance provided by the instructor beyond class (the instructor "was always available at office hours," or "was available out of class"), the teacher's concern for students' learning (the instructor"made sure we had understood" or"really cared"), or the teacher's ability to create a warm climate (the instructor"treated students as equals" or "acted human"). On the negative

side (65 responses) complaints were primarily about the teacher not being available outside class, or unfair treatment given to students (the instructor "showed favoritism for young female students," or "made fun of certain types of people," or "embarrassed students").

Of the 119 answers listed under category C (teacher's personal characteristics), 49.58% referred to positive experiences. Most mentioned the teacher's enthusiasm,the instructor's knowledge of the subject matter, or her good humor. Negative comments most frequently related to speech communication problems, particularly in the case of foreign teaching assistants (11 responses).

Finally, only 41 responses from this sample were classified under category D, attitudes towards adult students. Of these 70.73% described positive experiences, most focusing on schedule flexibility (rescheduling tests or changing deadlines based on the adult's particular situation) as the most critical behavior of teachers when dealing with adult students. Inflexibility was also referred to in negative classroom experiences, although at a much lower frequency (5 students).

To facilitate comparison of results of this study with previous studies of student perceptions of college teaching, the most frequently reported characteristics were also ranked without consideration to the four categories generated in this research.

It is possible to compare the results on an item by item basis to the results reported by Feldman (1976). Table 2 summarizes these ranked comparisons. All but two items mentioned by the adult students in the current study were reported by Feldman to be among the top 11 teacher characteristics mentioned in studies using an unstructured response format. There is also relatively little discrepancy in ranks between the current results and Feldman's summary (most items differ by less than five places). Exceptions are the greater emphasis given by our sample to encouraging questions and discussion (rank 2 compared to rank 7) and to instructor

enthusiasm (rank 5 compared to rank 11). Several items are mentioned among our 15 items that were not reported by Feldman in the rank order of characteristics found in unstructured response studies. These include instructor flexibility (rank 6.5), providing challenge (9.5 rank), relevance of course content (rank 11), humor (rank 12) and feedback to students (14.5). Three of these characteristics (relevance, challenge, and feedback) ranked in the top twenty characteristics included by Feldman in a list drawn from studies using a variety of reponse formats, although they were not mentioed frequently enough to be ranked in studies using unstructured (open-ended) response formats alone. Neither humor nor flexibility, however, appeared anywhere in Feldman's ranking of characteristics.

Place table 2 about here

Parallels can be seen between the items in Table 2 and items reported in Menges and Kulieke's (1984) "Teacher Affect" and "Teacher Task" categories. The most frequently mentioned teacher affect characteristics in that study included interest in students, consideration or respect for students, criticisms and communication patterns. These correspond to our positive items: concern, respect and friendliness (rank 4); and our negative items: poor communication (rank 7.5) or shows favoritism and unfairness (rank 10). Menges and Kulieke's top-ranked teacher task items included: (a) teacher feedback, (b) interest in subject matter, (c) allowing students to express themselves, (d) appropriateness of material, and (e) ease of understanding subject matter. Though the age range is not specified by Menges & Kulieke, it seems reasonable to assume that their primarily undergraduate sample (56 of 58) was comprised largely of traditional age students. Yet, all but two of their most frequently mentioned items have clear parallels in the current investigation.

Table 3 ranks the negative behaviors and characteristics as coded at an item level, revealing adult students' dissatisfaction with inconsistency, poorly planned or organized classes, failure to stimulate discussion, boring presentations, and confusing communication. It is difficult to make comparisons to studies of younger students, since perceptions of poor teachers have rarely been reported.

Place table 3 about here

Students' reactions. A total of 309 answers described the students' reactions to the critical incidents. Fifty-two percent gave reactions to positive incidents and the remaining 48% to negative ones. Table 4 illustrates the distribution of positive and negative comments regarding reactions across the four categories. Comments regarding feelings about self focused primarily on self-confidence. Feelings about subject matter and school in general often related to an increased interest in the content area or academic study in general as a result of the critical incident. Among the negative reactions, feelings of anger and hostility toward the instructor surfaced, sometimes strong enough to lead the student to complain to the teacher or other university officials.

Place table 4 about here

Analysis by sex and age group

Across all age groups, most positive comments fell under categories A (teaching style) and B (student-teacher relationship) while category D (attitude towards adult student) was infrequently mentioned. Although both males and females gave

priority to the instructor's teaching style over other categories, gender was found to be significantly related to the response category(X = 12.38, 3df, p. = .01). Inspection of the chi-square contingency tables indicated women made more comments than expected about teacher-student interaction while men made more proportionately more comments than expected about more teaching style. As for negative comments, both males and females in all age groups focused their comments on negative incidents related to teaching style.

Students' comments about negative reactions to incidents also showed a trend toward variability on the basis of gender (X = 6.4, 1 df, p. = .10) . As indicated in Table 5, males' comments most frequently focused on category B (feelings toward teacher), while females' comments most frequently focused on category A (feelings about self). While not statistically analyzed, inspection of the data also suggests a possible gender X age interaction worthy of further exploration. Males in the 30-34 age group, followed by females under 35, were the most likely to take action in response to negative incidents. Students over 35 rarely reported any action (such as dropping the course or talking to a department head) as a consequence of their negative reaction to what they perceived as ineffective teaching.

Place Table 5 about here.

Summary and Conclusions

The inductive analysis of adult undergraduate students' statements about incidents perceived to be indicative of particularly effective or particularly poor college teaching reveals relative consistency with results obtained in previous studies of traditional age students' perceptions of effective teaching. Although the sampling technique permits generalization only to adult students at one campus of a

major university, the findings suggest areas for further exploration. Across age groups and for both sexes the most frequently described characteristics of teaching incidents viewed favorably focused on teaching style, including clarity of presentations, organization of presentations, the ability to create student involvement, and interesting lectures. The category teacher-student relationships was next most prevalent in student comments, with positive statements about teachers who provided assistance beyond class, showed concern for students and created a warm learning climate. Negative comments in this category focused primarily on unavailability or unfairness toward students. Contrary to research indicating that teacher expressiveness is more important to overall faculty evaluations than instructional content under certain experimental conditions (Abrami, Leventhal & Perry, 1982), personal characteristics of teachers was the third most frequently mentioned category for this group of students. Finally, the smallest number of comments focused specifically on instructors' attitudes toward adult students. This was true despite the fact that instructions called attention to the students' judgements of teaching as an adult student.

It is appropriate to attempt to interpret this research in light of existing literature regarding characteristics of adult students. Based on Knowles' (1980) commonly cited assumptions about adult learners, we might expect the adults in this sample to have been concerned with instructor's availability and helpfulness, concern and respect for students, encouragement of discussion and selection of relevant course material. We might not as readily predict on the basis of Knowles' assumptions the students' concern for clarity of presentation, well organized lectures, and classroom management. Yet, those who have taught adult students in formal educational settings, particularly in higher education, would probably find no surprise in these results. This concern for structure, observed by many

instructors, may be explained in alternative ways. It may reflect adult students' concern with direct pursuit of learning goals in a time-efficient manner. They do not wish to see time wasted, either by non-committed younger undergraduates or disorganized instructors. As one adult stated:

> Since graduating from high school and enrolling in college, my attitude towards learning drastically changed. I am more serious about it than the average sophomore. The instructor is rather harsh, but who can blame him for trying to teach 350 students at once when half of them aren't even paying attention? I thought he should have taken control of the situation...

Alternatively, some adult students' high regard for organization and classroom control may be a function of their previous schooling experiences. Tracy and Schuttenberg (1986), based on a qualitative study of 496 students enrolled for graduate or continuing education credit, reported several emergent categories of teaching preferences which expressed clear desire for instructor dominance, in addition to categories indicating a desire the more learner-centered teaching. In that study the most frequently reported category was "instructor knows best," followed by "students want to be involved." In attempting to explain the preferences of some learners for teacher dominance, they cited Knudson (1980) who suggests adults' previous learning experiences have a significant impact on learner interaction preferences. Adults re-entering college may expect that the best teachers are those who fit the traditional teaching norms they were exposed to earlier in high school or college. Adults attending college are likely to be among those who were reasonably successful in earlier schooling; they may be even more likely than other adults to expect that teacher-student relationships will be similar in adulthood to those experienced during youth.

The proposed explanations of the mixed results of both this study and Tracy and Schuttenberg (1986), suggesting adult preferences both for andragogical learner-centered professors and more pedagogical subject masters, may be too simplistic. Recent discussions of andragogy have suggested the need for a situational analysis of the conditions under which it is appropriate (Beder, 1985; Pratt, 1988). It may be that studies which have attempted to identify what adult college students want in an instructor, including this study, have isolated too few of the important variables which may influence adults' desires for andragogical teaching. For the moment, these data suggest that adult undergraduates want many of the same things traditional age college students want in an instructor, as well as someone who is) flexible in responding to adult student needs and life situations, b) able to challenge to challenge students to grow, and c) able to relate theoretical concepts to relevant practical examples.

A unique contribution of this study is the inclusion of questions regarding students' personal reactions to the selected teaching incidents. Apparent differences between males and females are indicated, with females more likely to focus on teacher-student interactions in describing effectives teaching and to feelings about self in response to negative teaching incidents. Positive incidents seem to contribute more to feelings about self, the content studied, and school in general than to feelings about the instructor. This suggests the power that instructors have to nurture motivation in the adult student.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should compare large samples of otherwise similar adult and traditional age college students as well as sub-populations of adult students. It is important that more attention be given to specific learner and contextual variables which may affect student expectations, including: (a) content area, (b) class size, (c)

location of offering (on-campus or off-campus),(d) resident instruction or continuing education offering (e) format of study (including mediated instruction) (f) undergraduate or graduate student status, (g) career level of students, (h) learning style, and (i) gender . Students' personal reactions to classroom experiences should be studied in addition to the dimensions they perceive as salient to teaching effectiveness, since these reactions may mediate outcomes. Tools such as the Classroom Environment Scale (Darkenwald & Valentine, 1986; Moos, 1979; Moos & Tricket, 1974) should also be used to examine critical aspects of teacher effectiveness in the context of other dimensions of the learning environment.

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Table 1

Categories of Comments Regarding Teaching Behavior and Characteristics

Categories	Comments (n=691) Total n of total	%	Positive n of category	%	Negative n of category	%
A. Teaching Style	281	40.66	157	55.87	124	44.13
B. Teacher- Student Relationship	184	26.63	119	64.67	65	35.33
C. Personal Characteristics	119	17.22	59	49.58	60	50.42
D. Attitudes Toward Adult Students	41	6.6	29	70.73	12	29.27

Table 2

Comparative Importance of Teacher Behaviors and Characteristics

Behavior/CharacteristicFrequency	Frequency (current study)	Rank Order (current study)	Rank Order (Feldman)
1. Availability & helpfulness	45	1	1
2. Encourages discussion/questions [a]	38	2	7
3. Shows concern for individual student	32	3	2
4. Clear presentation	31	4	5
5. Displays enthusiasm	17	5	11
6. Stimulates interest	16	6.5	3.5
7. Flexibility	16	6.5	--
8. Well-organized lectures	15	8	6
9. Challenging	14	9.5	[17][b]
10. Knowledgeable	14	9.5	3.5
11. Chooses relevant content	12	11	[13][b]
12. Humorous	11	12	--
13. Fair	9	14.5	[9.5][b]
14. Controls classroom	9	14.5	[12.5][b]
15. Open-minded	9	14.5	--
15. Feedback to students	9	14.5	[15] [b]

[a] This category included the characteristic of open-mindedness in the study by Feldman while in the current investigation open-mindedness was treated as a separate item coded under the general category of teacher's personal characteristics.

[b] Several items not ranked for the unstructured-response format studies did appear in the list of ranked items computed across all categories of studies.

Table 3

Teaching Behavior and Characteristics Associated with Negative Critical Incidents

Behavior/Characteristic	Frequency	Rank Order
Inconsistent	20	1
Poor planning	17	2
Discourages questions	16	3.5
Boring	16	3.5
Confusing	15	5
Lectures from book	12	6
Poor communication	11	7.5
Not available outside class	11	7.5
Poor subject mastery	10	9
Unfair, shows favoritism	9	10

Table 4

Reactions to Teacher Behavior

Category of Behavior/Characteristic	Total Frequency n=310		Positive Reactions n=161		Negative Reactions n=149	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
A. Feelings about self	116	37.42	67	41.61	49	32.88
B. Feelings about instructors	83	26.77	29	18.01	54	36.49
C. Feelings about subject/school	82	26.45	59	36.65	23	15.54
D. Actions taken	29	9.35	6	3.73	23	14.54

Table 5

Negative Reactions to Teaching Incidents

Age 25-29		Age 30-34		Age 35+	
58 males - 46 comments		23 males - 16 comments		12 males - 11 comments	
B.	41.33	B.	31.20	B.	54.54
A.	28.26	C.	31.20	A.	45.45
D.	15.20	D.	25.00	D.	-0-
C.	15.20	A.	12.50	C.	-0-
33 females - 28 comments		27 females - 25 comments		27 females - 23 comments	
A.	32.14	A.	36.00	A.	47.83
B.	25.00	B.	32.00	B.	39.13
C.	21.43	D.	20.00	C.	.09
D.	21.43	C.	12.00	D.	.04

A. Feelings about self C. Feelings toward subject and school

B. Feelings toward instructor D. Actions taken

Note: Figures given are percentages in each category, listed in rank order